TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with BILL BALES

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for the

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[KW: Today is May 23, 1978. This is Karen Wickre talking to Bill Bales in his office at SUNY in Purchase, New York.]

BB: You see, at that time there was absolutely no endowment for the artists, none. And when Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey started their company--no, this isn't theirs but this gives you sane idea. See who the sponsor was? International Ladies Garment Workers. The unions were the first ones to sponsor modern dance because we were workers.

KW: Right. Well, you were.

BB: We were workers that were getting no money.

KW: Oh, I see. Sane of these names, of course, cane up in the Dance Project productions, too.

BB: Yes. Well, you see, a number of people in the Federal Theatre--for instance, here with. Charles. Weidman, Lily Verne, who was Cunegonde, was a very pretty blonde. Charles and Doris--let me see how the story goes. This is only background so I think you can understand what I think their interest, too in this thing. They made their public assault that came—let's see--they were invited to go down to the Dell in Philadelphia, which was like a Lewisohn Stadium, to do a Production. And I don't know whether it was--who was the director, whether Stokowski or--1 don't know who was the conductor of the orchestra. Anyhow, they came up and saw all these dances of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. They thought that was a marvelous idea and they had a concert in the Philadelphia Dell. It's out in the park. And they did all of the early dances like Water Study and Shakers and all of these, the Alcina Suite, and goodness knows what. They just were a raving success and that gave them entree to Broadway, an access. Broadway became interested in them because this was a new concept of dance, a concept of theatre. So the Americana and these things that were started at that time

reflected the sort of new America, the new vision of the contemporary artists

of their country, like Doris doing Shakers at that time. She didn't do that for Broadway. She was doing it because it was a fascinating moment of history and of a sect that used dance as the central focus of worship.

And it was a raving success. As a matter of fact, it was so successful that no one paid any attention to anything else that she did.

KW: That became the one thing?

BB: Everybody would talk about it and say, "Oh, what a marvelous concert! And that Shaker dance!" And she told me one day--she stopped doing Shakers. We all loved to do it because it involved you so much. And I said, "Doris, why don't you ever use Shakers in concert?"

She said, "No, sir. I put that to bed for a while because whatever else I do, people came back and all they talk about is Shakers, the Shakers. It's like it's the only thing I've ever done." She said, "I'm tired of it."

KW: Well, it was to get them to pay attention to other things.

BB: That's right. But their whole involvement with Americana and the American themes, American background was central to, I think, their direct relation to the WPA (Works Progress Administration) because they were concerned with the history of the individual and the individual of that time in the American concept. They were trying to develop writers and goodness knows what they were doing, the same thing with the dancers.

KW: Even Denishawn, my impression is--correct me if I'm wrong, but although they were developing a new kind of dance theatre, they didn't really concentrate so much on American themes as such.

BB: Oh, no, no, not at all. Ruth was a mystic and she developed--she's the one who conceived the sense--she was the conceptualist—the sense of the energy, the timing is evoked by your own heartbeat, the pulse of the heartbeat and

the breathing. So that you have the focus of breath, inner breathing, is either the time it takes to inhale and exhale and the constant pulse of your own heartbeat. So she—these mystical things that she was doing was really, although she had same idea of--she found out some people, the mystical thing because she was a mystic. She had that intuitive concern with the mystical thing, the mystical thing of the Indian dance, which is all internal. Like Charles Weidman used to say that she would sit there and go into a trance with breathing. And it was the whole generative experience that created—and every now and then an arm would fly up or a head would do something, you know, as accent. And you know, she began to explore and she was the one who was able to convey--she couldn't teach at all. The way they learned, they taught their dances, the dances that they made up, they taught to all their students. And that's how you learned how to dance. There was no technique as technique. There was no method but the breathing. So that this whole sense of going into yourself and of your—once you get concerned with the inner man and what is going on inside, you know, you are a populist almost by definition, you see. It's so easy to go on from that. And then because the ballet was always so fairy story and it was all so serene and the public myths that existed and that were danced in ballet or fantasies, these people began to find a personal myth, a subjective myth, of the human being rather than create a mystical or spiritual thing out of it, Except with a Shaker, Doris was fascinated to find that there was a whole movement experience that was developed out of these things. And part of it was they were celibate and what you do was to work it out, you know. (Laugh) That was part of it, a great part of it because they hardly touched. You'd come together and then you'd shake the sinner out, the sinful part. But

that's, you know, the kind of genesis here. So that when they started, all these people--it's fascinating to look at the names. You see, a lot of them were so-called left-wingers.

KW: Yes. That's their reputation, certainly.

BB: It was simply because there was no other way they could achieve what they felt they would like to communicate or at least spend part of our lives doing things about. Tamiris, she started the black songs because she felt an affinity with what they were saying, for one thing. And Tamiris, I think, of them all, she was the most aggressive one politically and she felt--you see, the unionism was just beginning at that point.

KW: Among the dancers or just in general?

BB: In general, in the society. Like the International Ladies' Garment Workers were just starting. Camp Unity in the Adirondacks was a place where all the needles and trades people went for their holidays. And they had shows, they had performances at Unity. They had speakers, they had musicians, they had good music, classic music. Then they also began to do more entertaining things. It was a summer place.

KW; The unions would own these camps?

BB: Camp Union as--

KW; I've heard of that and others. Tamiment?

BB; Tamiment was not; that was private. That's where we did that, where that came out. We all were there as entertainers. By that time Max Liebman--you know who he is?

KW; No.

BB; Well, Max Liebman made his big name on television._ He had the television Program with Imogene Coca and Sid Caesar for a long, long time. But before

that, he was the director of Camp Tamiment, the entertainment director. Because that year Imogene Coca was hired and Danny Kaye came and that's where Danny Kaye was discovered. He came in with the show. And we had Jerry Robbins. There were four men and four women. And the four women--there were two ballet and two modern men and women. And we would do probably eight new dances a week. Max would say, "You do something for Thursday and you do something for--" (laugh) and you ran them up.

KW: These were basically working-class camps or resorts?

BB; Camp Tamiment was this private resort and it was mainly patronized by teachers, schoolteachers, looking for romance in the mountains, mainly Jewish. And the entertainment was fantastic.

KW; I'm sure. I've heard so many people who were there, heard of them.

BB: Because this is where, Danny was discovered there, and Coca came there although she had had a reputation before. But Danny ***was*** unknown and Jerry Robbins was there. As a matter of fact, he did a little dance with Anita Alvarez, which was the embryonic thing that became his musical, West Side Story. But he did this little duet with Anita, who was Spanish and he was Jewish, that became the seed that was developed there. Ruthanna Boris was the leading dancer of--I don't know what they called it. It wasn't the American Ballet Company, but it **was** the beginning of what became ballet theatre. She was out, there. She was the most experienced of the dancers or the one who had already been recognized publicly. But what we would do, we would teach modern to the--you know, the modern people would give a lesson one day and the ballet people would give a lesson the next day. And we were learning like mad, a lot of things.

KW: You'd have to, I think.

BB: I mean, for uses artists. I don't know how much this is helping you, except that what it does--the influence it had on the arts at that period, which was the seminal period. Much of it was derived out of the point of view that was the WPA point of view at that time, where the individual was the focus.

KW: It just seems that there were so many more opportunities or forums for young performers to get a chance to do something, I mean between these camps and between all the things that were going on in New York. I might be wrong, I don't know.

BB; In New York there weren't that many things going on at that time except when the WPA started.

KW: Yes, that's the biggest forum, I think.

BB: Oh, yes, because there was no place for these people.

KW; Especially the dance, for instance.

BB; Nothing, and when you read the names of these dancers: Ailes Gilmour, Margaret Katz, Fara Lynn—she still teaches around here. They were young people, they were trying like hell, you know, to develop something called the Modern Dance at this time. But there was no subsidy, you see. They had no subsidy, they had no money. Charles and Doris taught; there was a school on 86th Street, and they taught in that school for a while. And I know at a Christmas course, I helped Charles. I was an assistant for Charles and I waited after one class and asked Doris to go out and have lunch with me. And these were people who came from out of town for a summer course. It may have been a winter course, I've forgotten, but I remember that we went out and I had been watching a composition class of Doris', She was just beginning to try to structure some kind of a way of studying and presenting her method of

composition to these young people. I said, "Doris, it was fascinating, that lesson that you gave these kids about composition." I said, "But you don't compose that way."

She said, "Oh, good heavens, no, Bill." She said, "I had to put it in some kind of form where there was a logic in which they could build from one step to the other. But, oh, God, no, no, no." But she was this way, she was conceptual and nobody knew--everybody was very anxious to learn what this so-called modern dance was all about.

KW: It's interesting that--I don't know if I'm giving the WPA too much credit, but there had been people in modern dance before, but it just seems that this time, maybe it was a dovetail of the times and the fact that the Government came in with some money, that things really took off.

BB: Indeed, indeed, because the dissatisfaction and, after all, what was this, in the early thirties? And the Depression of the twenties, that still was immediate, you know. And it was something in everyone's minds that was born before, you know, in the early twenties or earlier. And that was very real, and as a matter of fact, the reason that modern dance survived at that time was that it was a vehicle for protest. And we did. (Laugh) And the WPA, a lot of people who were on it were anything but what you would call talented dancers. There was, you know, one of everything there. Some of than were good and some of them did, have continued and have danced. They had learned enough and were able to assimilate and either teach or in performance, do something with dance. And a lot of us, at that time I'd been through two colleges and I had no money and my family had no money and I had to live. And Charles engaged me to help him with these things although that was--my name wasn't even on the program because I ***was*** helping him. I wasn't hired

by the Federal Theatre.

KW: You weren't paid by them?

BB: No, I was paid by Charles and I probably got, you know, like a dollar and a half a day, if I remember the salaries of the time.

KW: Probably. And I was wondering why I couldn't find your name on the programs. I looked.

BB: No, but--

KW: You worked like an assistant choreographer or--

BB: No, I was like the rehearsal director. He would set the things and then I would go--you know, I would take it and then work with the cast to get the movement correct and I'd rehearse it, like a rehearsal director doing that.

KW: Did you also dance?

BB: I didn't dance in this thing, no. I was in his own company. You see, he and Doris had--their company should do their work.

KW: Did they have joint and then separate groups? Or did they only have a joint group?

BB; They had a joint group but if Charles decided to do a men's dance which he would do because he had a men's company, then he would do this. There weren't very many of then. They were usually the male and the female were involved with it, and they did a variety of things. There were only eight of us in the company as I remember it. And Jose was, of course, the--had been with them longest, and he was given the plums. But they did. trios. I can remember the movement but I can't remember the name.

KW; Are you trying to think of other men dancers?

BB; No, it wasn't the men dancers, the name of it. It was like repetition, the deadliness of repetition was the theme of it. And that was only men,

with. sort of work movements. Because again, this was—you see, they were quite influenced by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Ted did work dances, a lot of work dances. He again tried to get masculine kind of energy and physicality of the male body and male energy. So Charles would start off and he would do things. Then you see, they would do theatre as well. Like the first time of their big success was when they were hired at the Dell in Philadelphia. Then the Shuberts came along and they did this revue} called Americana, which is where I came in. It was running a long, long-- I think that was the revue that Jose and Letitia Ide were in it. And there was a corny production number of this man carving out, this baritone coming out. And the theme was he had had a girlfriend and he gave her the air. And she wrote this letter about her going to kill herself, end it all because he threw her out, her disposition--she was destroyed. And there I was sitting up in peanut heaven and this girl--there was a singer and then Jose did the singer. He was the counterpart of the singer who danced with the girl. It was like two aspects, the singing and the dancing part. And they went sort of through the love thing and so on and so and so, with the guy singing. And it ended with her taking a backfall. She had thighs like--no man ever had such strong thighs. She could go down and she could go this high off the floor. But she was a beautiful girl and I sat up there and I just fell like a ton of bricks for this fabulous apparition. And when I joined the company and was placed next to her, I just (laugh) I couldn't learn anything. She just threw me, marvelous, marvelous woman.

KW: Does she still dance, do you know?

BB; No, she's not dancing now. She lives close by here, as a matter of fact. I brought her over to look at some things we were doing because she remembered

having been in the things that Doris—like Water Study that Doris did. We had done it from notation and the notation was wrong. They had left out a section and she put it back in; you know, it was that kind of thing. But they started, they had no money, Charles and Doris. There was no subsidy. They earned their money by teaching and the best students that came to their company, or came to their school, were invited into the company when they were needed, when replacements were needed, or when they needed implementation. And it was early, very early, so that Bennington had already started in, I guess, it was 1932 and I don't know whether it was 1933 or when exactly the dancing started from the very beginning. But the school started like maybe the next year at Bennington, very early. But it was a concept. Martha probably did things at the very beginning because of--now that I recall--Mr. Lee's pursuit of her.

But the summer school was started almost Immediately at Bennington, and what she did was, in order to permit these people to survive, like the Federal Theatre provided some money for them. Then she couldn't have Martha's company and Doris's company and Hanya Holm's company and Tamiris's company so she would invite--I think at first she invited. Martha to do some guest lessons and then her company do some performances. Then she would have Charles and Doris do the same thing. They would do some teaching for a couple of weeks and then their performance in the summer.

KW: That must have been nice to get that kind of exposure, wide exposure to—

BB.: But I'm not answering your question. I think you ought to—am I giving you information that you--

KW: Oh, yes. All this background is helpful, just to know about the modern dance scene in those days is good. If you want, you can just—you told me a little

in the car about how you got connected initially, what your background and training were and how you got in with Weidman and then into the Dance Project.

BB: Well, I had a sister who started to dance in Pittsburgh and since I had to earn my own way, I had to earn my tuition for school and I didn't know what I wanted to do--I'd always been a very active kid and always climbing trees and running and jumping. Movement was necessary for me. My two elder sisters were working at a newspaper, Sun-Telegraph newspaper, in Pittsburgh. I didn't know what I wanted to do and I decided to go into the School of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh. I started there and I had this job at the Sun-Telegraph at night from 5:00 to 10;00. That was, oh, answering pest calls. "I didn't get my paper" or "They didn't deliver this" or "They didn't do that" and trying to soothe them and getting, making sure that papers were delivered and so on. I was sitting for so many hours in the day that I was dying when moving is an essential for me. So my sister was doing musical comedy and tap and I went down to the studio and I started to do musical comedy and tap myself.

KW: Lessons and--

BB: Tap lessons at a professional studio and acrobatics, just to get my body moving. And there weren't very many men doing dance at that time and I began to get more and more fascinated by the dance. They began using me at the studio because of the few men there, to start partnering girls and that. Then my sister started to take ballet with Frank Eckl, who had a daughter, Shirley Eckl, who later, who was his best pupil. And she went to the American Ballet Theatre at one time. She joined that later on. And Frank Eckl, his wife played the piano and Shirley, his daughter, was

one of his great creations. I got there and the first thing he wanted to do was to put me into white tights and a black little jacket and do Swan

Lake and I' didn't know why I had two feet and one was right and one was left. So at least I had some critical sense of what I could do and what I

couldn't do and what I was comfortable doing and not doing. But my sister and I started a school.

KW: Oh, teaching?

BB: Teaching tap, acrobatics. She taught ballet. We had one in Carnegie where I lived and then we went to Washington….

…And we had some lovely and interesting students that we had developed and root my degree, although I'm more and more--

KW: In Business Administration?

BB: No, in Business Administration, but the only thing that turned me on

in that whole curriculum was a literature course that I took with a marvelous man. And Gladys Schmidt, the writer, was in the class with her boyfriend and a couple of other people. Well, the first thing you know Gladys and I became friends and I was in with the literary gang. And Business Administration was going farther and farther in the background. It was receding and we became

Very good friends. I began to find that the history of theatre that I began taking and my lit courses and the poetry courses were much more interesting

to me than this whole business folderol. And the theatre and dance was becoming much more fascinating. So I graduated from Pitt and went to Carnegie Tech and I got my B.S. in Business Administration from University of Pittsburgh and I went to Carnegie Tech and got my B.A. in Drank. But I danced all the way through Carnegie Tech and we had a marvelous woman named

Cecil Kitkat.

KW: What's the last name?

BB: Kitkat like Kitkat Club. She was a British woman, a dear, dear person whose father was in the British Navy. He was the captain of a Navy boat and she said he ran his home the way he ran his ship. She and her brother could not go to the head until he went first because he was the captain. (Laugh) And she was almost a spastic, had a spastic quality of movement, and nervous energy like mad. But she was teaching Dalcroze, she was teaching movement to the drama students. In the meantime, I had started to put on the ballet and I'd been doing the tap dance. I'd done acrobatics so I was into anything that moved. And we decided at Pitt—Earle Wilde was there, the pianist. No, he was at Carnegie Tech at the time taking lessons. He wasn't a member of the school, but he was taking his lessons there, and Jimmy McNaughton, who later became the Art Director for WABC, I think it was in New York, television, a very talented bunch of kids. So we decided, Cecil and Jimmy and Earle and I, we sat down and we said, "Let's do some ballets." Jimmy wanted to do sets and Earle write the music and Cecil would do the choreography and I would be the leading dancer. We got Patty Littell, who was one of the dancers there. I had done (laugh) oh, I forgot that. Frank Keller and Herm Liveright, Herman Liveright. Horace Liveright was a publisher and his son, Herm, was there and Frank Keller was one of the actors there. And we did a revue, a contemporary revue, and wrote very sophisticated sketches. And I began to do very sophisticated dances. I remember one called, Doing the Ballyhoo. Oh, God! I did a dance, my big success was doing a dance called Monotony Rhapsody. Oh, God, when you don't know anything, you try everything. I learned how to keep whirling. It was a take, a steal from the Dervish

dance that Ted Shawn did where you went around and round and round and round and round until you got, you know, hallucinations. So I learned to do this without throwing up, you know, and so on. But I did it differently. I did mine on geometric ideas of straight lines versus a circle and the energy of the circle developing and getting, working itself up into some kind of a whirlpool thing, brought the other, the straight lines into it until finally everybody was going whish. Well, I was a sensation in Pittsburgh because I didn't fall down or I didn't get sick in the middle of it or I didn't fall down dizzy.

KW: You didn't get disoriented or--

BB: Yes. That was my great contribution. Anyhow, we did that, but Hickman, who was our marvelous director at Carnegie Tech, was asked to do. Edwin L. Drake from Titusville in Oil City, Pennsylvania, brought in the first oil well in the world where he was able to cap it. It just didn't spill and go. So it was the 75th anniversary of the success of Edwin L. Drake with the oil well. So they asked Hickman, who had gone to school up there, to write and direct a pageant. And he said he would if he could bring his own musician, technician and his own dance director. And they said, well, no, they had dance directors there and they could use them. And he said, "I won't do it then" because he wanted me to come up and do it. So I did my dervish, my twirling thing except by that time the girls were stone and mud and so and so in the ground and I was oil swishing around and we all swished together. Well, it was, I tell you! The only dance that I was really afraid, that I was concerned about, was the square dance because that was square dance country and they knew about square dances. They didn't know about oil dancing. (Laugh)

Now this was before Federal Theatre but out of this background was when I went on to New York and nothing fazed me by that time.

KW: Did you go there with the purpose of studying more?

BB: No. Martha Hill who is now the Director of Dance at Juilliard, was coming to Pittsburgh to teach a lesson in modern dance at a physical ed. convention that was being held at one of the hotels, the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh. And she needed somebody who could improvise for the class that she wanted. She went to Elsa Findlay, who was a Dalcroze person in New York, to ask if she knew anybody in Pittsburgh who could improvise. And she recommended Cecil Kitkat who was the teacher at Tech who was one of the Unholy Gang. And Cecil called me and said, "You've got to get to that lesson because Martha Hill is one of the big, big leaders of modern dance in New York. And you must go and see what she does." So I got the day off and I went out and Martha, in about a minute, had me in the front of the class. She said, "I want to talk to you when the class is over" and all the people came over and they were asking thousands of questions and she grabbed hold of me and we went under the piano. She said that she knew Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey and they were looking for male students. They were giving scholarships for young students because they wanted to enlarge their company. She wanted to know all about me and if I was interested in going there. And it was like, you know, like giving me the Holy Grail. I didn't hear and didn't hear and finally I heard and I went to New York and Martha Hill and I are now writing the book about Bennington Dance. She's been my dearest friend ever since.

KW: So you didn't really know Weidman, you didn't know any of that group before you left?

BB; No, no. I went to New York and then went to the class, to the classes that he had with these oh, 10 or 12 boys.

KW: Would this still be early thirties?

BB: It was about 1935 that I came in because 1936 I was in the company and 1937 I was helping him.

KW: 1936 is really when the Dance Project got under way, too.

BB: You never had a chance to grow up. You had to explore really, you had to do it. But this was really the background of dance. I'm telling you all this not to help my story, but I think this is the background of most of the people who were involved in that company. There was in WPA--as a matter of fact, when -I wasn't getting enough dance with Charles and Doris. I wanted more because, you know, I was eager to do as much as I can. And there was a woman named Sylvia Manning and her husband--I forgot what his name was.

KW: Gene Martel?

BB: Yes. Sylvia had been Doris's leading dancer and Doris was a very strange woman. I loved her very much, but she would do very strange things Her students got jobs working in Broadway shows. Doris finally got a new thing and she wanted to work on a new dance that she (claps hands) "All right, kiddies, come home. Mama's ready to start a new dance." And they said, "I work here." They could only work certain hours and she just wouldn't contend with that.

KW: That's strange. Some of these women in California were saying that Martha Graham--

BB: Same way.

KW: --was that way, also although they claimed that she wouldn't even let her dancers go out.

BB: Do anything else.

KW: Yes, do anything else.

BB: But when you have--

KW: Which is understandable in one way but on the other, you know, how are you going to live.

BB: Yes, had boyfriends. She didn't have any men; she only had women.

KW: Oh, that's right.

BB: You see, and there was Charles and Doris. And then Jose had come in.

Doris went to the whole company, first company after they had tasted the illicit and made money and were living and eating. And she said, "Now you all quit your jobs and cane home." And they said, "Nuts to you! Oh, no. Ph, no. And she started and got a whole new company and that's when

Katie Litz and Sybil Shearer--I think Katie Manning, Katherine Manning, was the only one of the old gang that stayed. Jose stayed, but the Martels and Sylvia Manning it was, and Martel; they left and all the other people left. And then Kenny Bostock was a boy from the state of Washington.

There were several people because there had been Nellie Cornish's school

out in Seattle that Bob Joffrey sort of, you know, came out of that bailiwick. She was a fantastic, intuitive--

KW: Nellie Cornish?

BB: Nellie Cornish —woman who had heard about these things, went to New York to find

out. And she was beginning to encourage people like Bob and Merce Cunningham, John Cage, all these people were Nellie Cornish's people.

KW: Oh, I didn't know that.

BB: Oh, yes, yes. You know, it's very funny, things like Tolstoy, his whole sense of there is a time when things happen. It's all biblical, "There is a time." And it was so strange, you know, that in New York and way out in

Washington Nellie Cornish was carrying on. And people like Dorothy Bird

and Bonnie Bird and Kenny Bostock, they were all Nellie Cornish--Nell Fisher. Half of than joined Martha's company. That's Dorothy Bird, who came from up there. She came from Cornish, and they already had a sense of these experiments and movement. These were a bunch of young people, some of us not that young. You know, I had been through two colleges although I only spent three years--I lived right near school. And I used to go down every day, every day, and look at the kids that were there in school. I was the oldest and I just plagued my mother about going to school. And she lied and told than I was six years old, so I really started school when I was five, you see, (Laugh) just to get rid of me because another one was on its way. So I was still younger, one year younger then, but the gang that came—who was the other one? Bonnie Bird, who is now in London--they're no relation--she also came from Cornish. Kenny Bostock came to us rather than going__ well, Graham didn't have men. As I say, John Cage and Merce came out of that thing. But Nellie was fermenting, she had the yeast there that was trying to make it happen. She was much more concerned with theatre, not only dance but theatre, acting and dance as well and seeing things. She was an influence on Joffrey, too. And people would come in from the West Coast. Oh, down in Los Angeles--what's the guy who died? Has a big school? Oh, I can't remember, I've drawn a blank. Bella Lewitsky was one of the company, was his leading dancer.

KW: I can't remember.

BB: Well, Bella Lewitzky was in the company. Geoffrey Holder and his wife were out there dancing with him. Who else was there? When we went out--he was a stealer. He would steal all the ideas. It's true. What the hell was his name? It's on my tongue. Martha Graham was up at Bennington and she was

doing, oh, which one? It could have been Appalachian Spring or something like that, and he came walking in the theatre. I was walking with Martha Hill and Martha Graham and he came up and he said, "Martha," to Martha Hill he said, "they tell me there are no more seats. I've come all the way from California to see you, Martha. And they say there are no more seats; they won't let me in." And Martha says, "I don't run the box office. If there aren't any seats, there is a very limited seating capacity."

And he said to Martha Graham, he said, "You can get me in, Martha. If you wanted to, you could get me in."

And she just turned and slapped him on the face and said, "I want to be the first to do my dance in America." (Laugh) He was a real--although he did develop a lot of very talented people. I can't--oh.

KW: It'll probably come back to you at the moment when you're least expecting it

BB: Yes. But this is sort of the whole background of it. With these things, my role was to—working with Charles--was to be there as he was teaching the movement and then take--and it was rehearse, a rehearsal director. And take the rehearsals and then make sure that they learned the spacing and they got the musical thing correct. I was an assistant to him in that way.

KW: Because he was busy with outside work?

BB: Yes, he was teaching regular classes and, you know, to try to do anything at all to keep going. And we had the company in addition to this, you see. He was doing class. This was in 1937 and the next year, 1938, they went up to Bennington. 1938 was the big year that Graham and Humphrey/Weidman and Hanya Holm, Charles Weidman, we were all up there. And that was a mad, mad year.

KW: For the year or for the summer?

BB: For the summer. But everyone, you know, was interested in this thing. But by that time a lot of these people, Philip Gordon, Lily Verne, Maurice Silver, oh, he was so funny. He was a strange—he must have been about 10 years older than anybody else in the company. And he was very fey and plump and he had about maybe 20 strands of hair in his—coming in the front, that he would put in the front here. And he was always going like this (gestures). I don't know why I remember that because it was so--I never saw a man do that before. He was always Maurice who lived down in the East Village before the East Village was--

KW: The place to live?

BB: --the place to go.

KW; Was there much stigma about being a male dancer then? Did you run into--

BB: Oh, sure there was.

KW: --that sort of problems? What was the--

BB; Well, my father said, "Son, you've been through two colleges and you have a good education in Business Administration. You have an education in Emma. Now you're going to be a dancer? In New York where you can't even make enough to eat? Why did you want an education?" My father was a--came to America from Europe. He had an older brother; he came here. My mother came--he had been married and had two daughters and his wife died and he married my mother. I was born a year later and we had four other kids. Life was pretty real and pretty earnest and he just didn't understand although my sister was a dancer and we talked about dancing. He had same understanding of that, and Mr. Eckl taught Physical Ed. in the city schools. His wife was a pianist, a very nice woman. But my dad just couldn't see where that, at that point--my God, how in hell could you make a living dancing?

That's really, you know, the concern with your children, how are you going to eat?

KW: I guess it's a reasonable enough question and I guess especially that a man who was supposed to theoretically support himself and other people.

BB: Sure and other people, indeed.

KW: There certainly weren't as many male dancers. I don't know about in ballet, but in modern dance it must have been a different ball game.

BB: But even in ballet there were enough men. I mean, after all, the, what is now the Ballet Theatre was in existence. And Jerry Robbins and oh, a whole gang of young kids. Jerry was from Brooklyn. His sister--you see, if I hadn't had a sister that had danced, I don't think I would have--I wouldn't probably have gone to Carnegie Tech where my interest in theatre developed. And then dance became the language where I felt most at home. You know, I was most comfortable and most at home in dance more than in speech. And after the Monotonous Rhapsody we did Persephone, which was a stunning performance. Earle was a damned good musician, very good, and Jimmy was a very clever designer. The setting was marvelous and Cecil was, she also was a gone girl who--well, she was about 10 years older than all of us, but she was no older than all of us. You know, the age didn't mean a damned thing. And we just got the best kids there and we did fantastic things, really we did.

I tried ballet and when I got to Doris and Charles, I was working. I did more ballet and since I was always a jazz dancer, that could, I could do that. I worked--as a matter of fact, one of Frank Eckl's pupils, Katherine Iles, was 4 ballet dancer at Radio City. And I got a call from Katherine one night. They were doing Ravels Bolero and Florence Robey, who was the

director, was a bitch (laugh).

KW: That was Radio City director?

BB: Yes. She was Ray Needhof's girlfriend but oh, a not nice woman. She made an announcement, one of the kids, one of the boys got sick. They had eight boys that worked with all the girls. And they had not only the ballet girls, but the Rockettes. There were 24 ballet girls and 24 Rockettes and these eight boys. And this is a terrible story; it's very funny. It has nothing to do with the WPA, but it's funny. She asked the group there. She said, "This boy's been sick and he had to go home. Does anyone know a dancer who is a quick study and who is free to come immediately and join them because they open tomorrow?" And Katherine Iles, who was Frank Eckl's star dancer who had been one of the ballet girls at Radio City, called me and said, "Bill, if *you're* interested and want to came, are you a quick study?" I said, "Very." (Laugh)

"Can you get here right away?" I was living down on Fifth Street, way downtown. I said, "Yes" and I got there and here were these like 60--no, it was 25. It must have been about 50 people there.

KW; Waiting for you?

BB: Waiting for me. And Robey says, "Miss Iles says you're a quick study." I said, "I think so."

She said, "We'll find out." And the guy beat the drum and she says, "Now all of you, I want you to sit in the corner and be quiet. You're going to stay here as long as it takes this man to learn this dance."
I was getting like this on it as if I was carrying the world on my shoulders.

Anyhow, all I did was concentrate and she says, "You start here and you go here and you go here." Well, she did a section and she stopped and she said, "Would you like to do that from the beginning?"

I said, "Oh, indeed." So I went from beginning and anyhow, she kept saying, "You're a quick study. Oh, you're a very quick study." And we went through the whole thing and we did it about three times. And she said, "Do you want to do it again?"

And I said, "I don't think it's necessary. I think I have it." I said, "I think I need a night's sleep if I have to be here at 7:00 in the morning. I have to get same sleep so that I can be relaxed."

So she said, "Fate has been good to you because he is such a quick study, so you all can go home." And they gave me a big hand and I had to be there at 7:00 and be fitted for a costume. Then after that we had to do lights. We had a space and then we had to do lights. Then we had to do the thing with the orchestra. And then there was about two and a half hours before the first performance and I was exhausted, just exhausted. I went to the dressing room and I relaxed and pretty soon I heard, "Half hour for curtain." And I had to put makeup on, and I was like half asleep. I got myself up, I got done and you know Ravel's Bolero where every note sounds like every other note?

KW; Yes.

BB: When the music started, I looked at the girl and said, "What do I do now?" As fast as I got it, it went out the same way. I've never, it still makes me feel miserable. (Laugh) I forgot it as easily as I learned it.

KW: I'm sure her attitude didn't help any.

BB: Oh! Butt naked in front of those thousands of people there with nothing to hold onto! They'd run here, "Let me down!" "Not her! The other one!" Oh, God! Then I worked--that's how I ate the first year. I didn't have to do WPA because I did that.

KW; Did you have like a variety of jobs like that, you mean?

BB: No, I just worked--

KW: Just that one?

BB: I went back, they called me back any time they needed men. You see, the men weren't part of the thing, but any time they did a dance where they required men, I became a regular. And that's how I ate because at that time, we used to get $10 a performance and they paid you like $50 a week. And that was, you know--

KW: That's twice what you would have gotten on WPA…

BB: There were a lot of very good people and there were a lot of people who were just there, you know.

KW: Among the dancers, you mean?

BB: Yes. It was a mixed bag, very mixed bag.

KW: Did you keep up at all with the, I don't know, administration side of it? Were you aware of these audition boards and Don Oscar Becque and all that?

BB: I knew Don Oscar a little bit, but I really didn't know. Don Oscar had also, he was out of Brooklyn Academy, wasn't he?

KW: I don't know what else he did.

BB: Now wait, Don Oscar Becque and Felicia Sorel, they're not teamed up together, those names?

KW: I never have seen them teamed up. The main reason I know him is that he was the first administrator of the Dance Project for a year. But the dancers apparently weren't happy with him and there were all kinds of--let's see, I've got a--

BB: Was he from Brooklyn?

KW: I don't know what his training was. In fact, no one I've talked to--well,

this isn't really about him but there is a petition I have somewhere, a petition for the removal of Don Oscar Becque. He lasted from 1936 to 1937, I think. It surprised me when you said Doris Humphrey wasn't too political. I don't know why her name is on this--

BB: Well, Louis Horst--I mean, after all. Gluck Sandor. Oh, God!

KW: He did a production, The Eternal Prodigal.

BB: And Klarna Pinska, bless her heart. She just did a marvelous reconstruction of Denishawn, absolutely marvelous. She's 80 some now.

KW: That's right. And it's playing now?

BB: Yes.

KW: I met her in San Francisco.

BB: Elsa Findlay was the one I talked about.

KW: Right. Yes, I thought I recognized her name.

BB: Yes. Elsa was marvelous. She was a Dalcroze person and I got to know her. And Louis, bless her heart or his heart. He was marvelous. Doris, isn't that funny. Well, you had to, like Tamiris--

KW: She seems to have been the most politically involved.

BB: Yes. Tamiris, she was most agitprop. Her dances had more immediate protest behind, like those black songs, too. I think part of it was the whole--you go out and fend for the underdog. That's very true with Tamiris. She was active. Doris was not active in that sense. You see, Graham was completely withdrawn and only involved with the art itself. And Louis Horst, who too was apolitical except that anything with bad taste would offend him. And the same thing with. Graham, but Graham was creatively so--she is the kind who must commit herself completely to what she is doing and cannot separate herself in different ways. You see, Doris is--in Doris's lecture demonstration

about dance, she would talk about the Dionysian individual. She wouldn't say Martha Graham. She was talking about the Dionysian. She was not Dionysian.

KW: The word that I've heard to describe her is "cerebral." Or as you said--

BB: No, but she's the Appollonian man, you know. And in her lecture demonstration she would talk about the Appollonian and the Dionysian and their two ways of relating to experience. And she indeed was the Appollonian who had perspective on what was going on and was not emotionally and demon-driven that way. She was driven and she is the kind, for instance, when she would start creating a dance and she would suddenly say, "Take a 15-minute break." And she would sit down and (motions).

She would do this for about 15 minutes and say, "All right, now." And she would have worked it all out in her mind and Graham would never, ever, ever, ever do anything like that. But she talked, in the lecture demonstrations she would talk about the Appollonian and the Dionysian character of individuals and how essential it was in the artist to have aspects of both and so on and so on. But she was Appollonian. She thought things through. It was--she wasn't without passion, but she decided that she should experience all the things a woman should. And she and Katherine Manning, who was a member of the company and older than the rest of us but not as old as Doris, the two of than decided to go down to the Bermudas or one of the islands. She met a captain of a boat there who thought she was quite lovely, and she decided he would make a good husband because he would be away a lot of the time. So she married him.

KW: That's funny. I read that and I wondered.

BB: When she died he married. Joyce Trisler. But they had one son, who is in

publishing. But this is Doris. Doris was not calculating but she always thought things through. She had to. You see, Mama took her--she was never young. Mama took her by the hand when she was a little kid and she learned how to dance and she taught dancing from the beginning. You know, she had responsibilities and a self-identity from the very beginning. Charles, who was younger than she, did things by instinct completely. You see, Doris created a structure for composition, a technique of composing.

KW': How would Charles teach, then? How would he do it?

BB: Well, they both were members of the Denishawn company so they got a lot of fundamentals from Denishawn, the breath, for instance. That was Miss Ruth and that whole sense of the breath as the core experience and the The Yogi was one of Ruth St. Denis's first dances. But it was all an investigation of breath as the generator of movement and how it was used and how yoga was used as a cult experience, an occult experience as an, again, inner experience. And the problem is how do you make visible what is the geminal and seminal ideas that are going on inside although Graham's also had that inner orientation. You see, all of that internality was Denishawn. You see, that was Ruth St. Denis. She was the one who really got the vision, not Ted. Ted packaged it, but she was a conceptualist. And her first dance was Radha. The Hindu princess is brought in by a bunch of Hindus and these Hindus come and they ask the goddess to tell them the divine mystery of man, of himself, of the who, what and so on. And she would get up and she would dance these various things. And she had such a sense of concentration that although she seemed to be all inside and she would just sit there breathing, and suddenly a hand would be brought up on her breath and it would be like, you know, you do this and you're startled. And suddenly it

went on and on and she had bends. And suddenly she dropped a bead and stood up on one foot and it just seemed as if it was levitation. It was the trick that she had and Charles said it was magical because she had you hypnotized by these damned beads and she would drop them. And then she would just rise, rise off the floor and it looked as if she, like smoke, was just getting up. She had that ability, but there was--she was the one who intuited the possibilities of the body and what makes you move. And she was able to communicate this to these kids, these people who were with them. And although she couldn't teach them, she was the one who stretched their imagination to the point where they were able to go and develop their own way. You see, Louis had been her musical director, Louis Horst, and then he went to Europe and saw what they were doing with painting at that time and how they were breaking it alive and the dynamics of it, which was entirely different. They just weren't making pretty pictures. He was the one who led Graham into the contraction and that whole thing of the energy as a takeoff point.

KW; You were talking about--don't let me interrupt you.

BB: But you see, Graham was so--she only had a women's company at the beginning and she was more mystical than the other dancers at that time. Doris didn't work on the Project, but Charles did and Jose did with than and I came in as an assistant and sort of rehearsal assistant to him. I hadn't been with him long. I came in 1936 and this was the next year. You had no time to grow up, you know, you exploded.

KW; The next thing you were doing it.

BB: Sure. But it was R godsend at that period because all these people later continued in dance, they could not have survived if it hadn't been for WPA

at that time. And I was--first the job I had with Robey at Radio City and then here when I helped Charles with this project because there were just too many, you know, too many elements. And he would go off/rehearsing at or teaching—they were teaching up at 86th Street--and I would take the rehearsals and go over things and work with the kids. And out of this, like out of this group, Charles, Jose was in the company--no, no, this is 1937, this isn't the one. Philip Gordon, Lily Verne was in the company. Milton Feher was in it for a little while. Lili Mann was—gee, I don't know whether she really came in the company.

KW: Into Weidman's?

BB: Into the Weidman company.

KW: I don't know either.

BB: I don't think she did. Lee Sherman was in it, Maurice Silver was in it for about a year or it may be just in sane of these dances. Now, let's see, who are these? - Paula Bass, Add Bates. Add Bates became a marvelous sculptor, a wood sculptor, a very talented guy who died. John Conway, Milton Feher now has developed a kind of a movement therapy, primarily for singers. It relaxes the throat. He still has a studio in New York. Philip Gordon was not a very interesting dancer, but he was around the studio. He was a member of the company. Miriam Krakowsky was teaching out in one of the colleges somewhere. Anne Lief has done a most marvelous film in Claremont, California, of young people, she and her husband. Barlin is her name.

KW: Right.

BB: Did you see her?

KW: I met her. I haven't seen the film.

BB: Go get it. It is the best film--

KW: I didn't know about the film. I knew about other educational material.

BB: It is the best dance film of young people that I've ever, ever seen. It is absolutely marvelous. But you see, to go on from here and develop this film, this is something to see. I have a copy of it. I made the college buy it--made them: (laugh)

I couldn't wait. Anne Lief, Katie Litz, of course, Katherine Litz was in the company for a long time. I think she was brought in to play--no, she was just a dancer here, not

KW: Well, they might have listed them both. No, I guess not.

BB: Lili Mann. Oh, she was in this company for a long time and then she danced in other Broadway shows. Kathleen O'Brien. All these were around. Lee Sherman became a member of the company. Sidney Stark for a little while. Winifred Widener is still teaching dance. I see her now and then, but most of these people went on and are still in one way or another involved.

Peter Dominic, I don't remember him. Add Bates I knew quite well. Saida Gerrard. Saida's in California now.

KW: Yes, I met her. She's in that video tape, too. She's the head of dance at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.

BB: Oh! I didn't know that. And Tamiris's people I didn't know well. Sane of them I knew. Fara Lynn is still around. I see her at all the performances. Sasha Spector, Ailes Gilmour. She was Bill Matons' girlfriend.

Oh, a tough girl! But this was the second year. I came in 1936 and this was 1937. You never really had a chance to grow up. You just got thrown in and everything was bursting all over the place.

KW: Did you work on other productions of--

BB: No, this is the only thing that Charles did that I remember that I was with.

KW; Yes, you're right. I know Doris did--

BB: What did Doris do?

KW: Let's see, maybe not.

BB: I don't remember Doris being connected.

KW: She did work on—

BB: She may have worked with Charles.

KW: Oh, I don't know what you called this program, this "Suite in F" business that has With My Red Fires and Dance of Life dances.

BB: Oh, oh.

KW; To the Dance, right. That was one program and I think that—

BB: But those were done in her own company by her own company.

KW; Right.

BB: And we performed—yes, I have the program. Here, I think this is the one. Excerpt from Quest. No, this is here. (Noise) ILGW, that's it.

KW: Well, they, apparently what they did sometimes--

BB: They were looking for sponsorship anybody/ who would, you know, give them a date.

KW: Well, I think that when they would do them under the Dance Project, they would have a mix of their own company and WPA. That's my impression. I'm trying to think if there were any more. Well, no, Tamiris did Adelante. She did more. (Noise)

BB: **Is** that the Rouselle Suite?

KW: I don't know.

BB: Rouselle. They had a dance called the Rouselle Suite.

KW: Tamiris did more.

BB: Yes, she worked religiously around it. Gluck Sandor was the one who developed— what's his name?

KW: Robbins?

BB: Robbins. He was first teacher. Robbins' sister started to dance there, to be a dancer, and Robbins worked with Don Oscar for a little while.

KW: Did you know Nadia Chilkovsky?

BB: Yes. I still see her.

KW: I'm going to meet her on Thursday, I think.

BB: Well, these, oh, Roger Pryor Dodge. Lily Mehlman. Lily was in Martha's company and she's still around.

KW: She is?

BB: Oh, yes. She has a daughter who is a marvelous photographer, dance photographer. And she is married to a man who is a beautiful photographer. Lily is very much She and Jane Dudley and Sophie Maslow, they go back to Martha when she's reconstructing.things. It might be 12 o'clock, let me see.

KW: If You know how I can find some of these people, if you either have addresses or can tell me where they're teaching or something, I'd love to find some of them.

BB: Lily Mehlman should be in the telephone book in New York. I don't have her telephone number.

KW: Well, if she's in New York, I can find it.

BB: Sophie Maslow could give it to you.

KW: You mentioned Milton Feherbeing in New York.

BB; Milton Feheris also at--the last time that I saw him, he had an apartment about 58th. or 59th Street, somewhere around there, 57th, up around there. But he developed a particular movement, exercises for singers to avoid straining. And he had somewhat of a reputation for doing this and he had quite a large group of people coming and over the years he has been able to survive doing that.

KW: Many people have gone into these--I mean, like you mentioned Anne Lief and she teaches children and goes on these--whatever it's called.

BB: Residencies.

KW: Yes. She does that for NEA (National Endowment for the Arts).

BB: That's because of that film.

KW: Yes.

BB: It's brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

KW: I think maybe she did give me a brochure about it or something.

BB: You must see it, you must. You must get to see it.

KW: And Eva Desca?

BE: Oh, God, yes. Eva I knew quite well.

KW; She has just finished a book on teaching dance to older people and it's being published by Doris Humphrey's son, or that company anyway. So it's true that a lot of these people--

BB: Oh, sure, it goes on. I'm surprised to hear that Eva was doing that. Arthur Maloney. God! Don Oscar.

KW: You didn't have to come into contact, I guess, very much with any of the administrative side of things.

BB: No. No. Really I didn't know what in the world was going on. When I got to New York, got into all this, it was like everything exploded. And I didn't know what was going on, but I was having the time of my life is all I can tell you. That was difficult. I had no money and I had to live and I had to eat. As a matter of fact, at that time--it isn't in here, looking in 1937 to find these. Now where's the clipping? You saw this, I guess.

KW; Yes.

BB: I was surprised that I had found this, had taken it. But I worked, I knew

Bill Polodny, who was the director of the YMHA (Young Mens'Hebrew Association). I knew him from Pittsburgh, so I just went to Bill and I said, "I've got to eat, Bill if I'm going to stay with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman because I certainly don't earn anything from them that enables me to live." And he just went to the Y and he had--I don't know who was doing modern dance or ballet, but I did tap dance and I did ballroom, taught ballroom dancing.

KW: This was when you first came?

BB: Yes. I would do anything for a living, to make a living.

Oh, I was so happy to see these things. By and large, there were a lot of people there who didn't know how to dance at all.

KW: (Noise) That's a description--I ran across this--
This is supposed to be the requirements on the 'Dance Project.

BB: Pavley-Oukrainsky American Ballet, Fokine School, Duncan New Dance League School. You see, there again--

KW: That was Sophie Maslow, wasn't it?

BB: No, it--well, Sophie Maslow, she wasn't the generator of that. Edna Ockow, who then went on to—oh, she was mixed up with the left-wing communist paper. Sophie really wasn't political in that sense. She was always a dancer--Rebel Art School—although her husband was a schoolteacher mixed up with leftists. Elsa Findlay, she was the Dalcroze. Marmein School, Kobeloff. All these are very--they're the ballet schools. Don Oscar Becque, Lillian Shapero is still around. Anna Sokolow, bless her heart. Edwin Strawbridge, oh, he was a terrible dancer. Bird Larson, Tamiris. Tamiris was a personality; she was marvelous. New York, Wigman School. That was Hanya. Hans Weiner, he couldn't dance very much either. He was in Boston. Matilda Naaman. Sophie Delza, she's an interesting

woman and she has developed a system of--oh, it's really tai ch'i that she's based it on, her work on it. Graham, Emily Hewlett, Tamiris. These were the--if you came to New York, you'd go to one of these schools.

KW: Well, everyone I've talked to did. I don't know what the claims were about, you know, people not being able to dance more on the Project. Maybe that was true for some.

BB: There were a number--they weren't--

KW: How do you suppose they got in?

BB: Because they could probably give evidence that they had danced in something or had been students of and they certainly could justify the financial need. But I don't know, the flexibility of--if you had danced once with Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey, I guess you were a modern dancer, you see. I don't know. There was a great—there was not much organization as yet. It was the beginning of being organized, but there was no unification.

KW: of principles? or goals?

BB: Well, outside of the left-wing, the only, the real organization was with left-wing people. Like this kind of thing would rally people together although Doris was never a joiner. She was always one to be only concerned with working although she had a sense of her fellow man. But she was-when you are committed completely to developing something that you know is going to affect this, you're really only concerned with what you're trying to get, you know, what you're trying to discover and what it is and know it because you don't have time to be political and do the other. You see, Graham never, you know, she never did this and she didn't—although her company was full of kids who were doing, who were left-wing things. Jane Dudley who's--my God, her father, Jane's father, Jane and Sophie had the company. The Reader's

Digest was started in Jane's father's garage. And she's all within, you know, this whole bit of it. She married a guy who was left-wing, but she became educated and certainly expanded her vision of life and the essentials, the necessities. And her mother had been a teacher of dance and it was through her mother that she got involved, and she still is involved. She works in London now at The Place.

But it was a valuable, a marvelous period. Nobody knew what we were going to do from one day to the next. And I told Charles, you know, that I just had to have, you know, a way to function and to pay my rent. I had no way, didn't have the money. And if I took a job, then I couldn't be with him. So he took me on. That was only the second year I was in the company. You didn't have time to grow up. You had to, you know, you had to suddenly be full bloom. That's how everyone had to do at that time. You just had to do that, so if you had any natural ability, that had to--

KW: That had to come out fast.

BB: Fast, very fast. You didn't have time to nurture it or to explore it….

[End of Interview]

[There was additional discussion unrelated to the interview. This material was edited for relevance.]